DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 201 080 EC 132 505

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TITLE Learned Helplessness in Exceptional Children.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (11th, Holy Cross, NM, October 15-17, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Attribution Theory; Elementary Education; Exceptional Child Research; *Learning Disabilities; *Locus of Control; Problem Solving; Self Control
IDENTIFIERS *Learned Helplessness

ABSTRACT

The research literature on learned helplessness in exceptional children is reviewed and the authors' efforts to identify and retrain learning disabled (LD) children who have characteristics typical of learned helplessness are reported. Twenty-eight elementary aged LD children viewed as "learned helpless" were randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions based on scores on the Intellectual Achievment Responsibility Scale. Results indicated that learned helpless LD children who received attribution retraining became more persistent on unsolvable tasks than did those students who received no attribution retraining, and that significant effects were observed for time on task, internalization of personal responsibility, and performance on the mathematics subtests. (DB)

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Learned Helplessness in Exceptional Children

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Eleventh Annual Conference

Holy Cross Retreat
Las Cruces, New Mexico
October 15-17, 1980

Registration $15.00 Members
$ 5.00 Students

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Learned Helplessness in Exceptional Children

Learned helplessness was advanced as a model to explain the process whereby non-contingent reinforcement results in a perception of independence between one's response behavior and subsequent performance (Maier, Seligman, & Soloman, 1969). The learned helplessness model was formulated based on experimental research with dogs (Overmier & Seligman, 1967). Parallel findings have been reported in other infrahuman studies with cats (Seward & Humphrey, 1967) and in rats (Hannum, Rosellini, & Seligman, 1976).

The expectation of learned helplessness has been reported in adult humans (Thornton & Jacobs, 1971; Glass & Singer, 1972; Hiroto, 1974, among others). These authors demonstrated that when human participants were subjected to inescapable or uncontrollable situations, their performance was impaired. The decrement in performance was observed in students with both instrumental or motor oriented or cognitive or mental involvement tasks. This decreased performance was attributed to the concept of learned helplessness. It implies that the subject perceives an independent relationship between one's behavior and subsequent performance. This was articulated in the Thornton and Jacobs study (1971). When the students in the inescapable group were asked why they did not respond on a test trial, the remark was, "they felt they had no control over shock, so why try" (p. 371).

Hiroto (1974) investigated the relationship between learned helplessness and locus of control. He reported that students who attributed control to external situations were more passive than students who viewed control as

being internal.

Klein and Seligman (1976) concluded from their study with depressed and non-depressed college students that learned helplessness could be experimentally induced. Furthermore, they demonstrated that learned helplessness could be counterconditioned or unlearned.

Only recently have researchers attempted to study the relationship between learned helplessness and learning with exceptional grade school children. McCrone (1979) has attempted to use the concept of learned helplessness to further explain learning lags of deaf children. Chapin and Dyck (1976) have conducted research with grade school children who experienced reading difficulties. Thomas (1979), in an effort to explore needed research for handicapped children, emphasized the likely role of learned helplessness with learning disabled children. He noted the similarities between learned helpless individuals and observations of learning disabled children, as reported by teachers of the handicapped. Learning disabled children are often viewed as helpless in the sense that many view themselves as having little or no control over the outcome of events in their environment.

Learned helpless individuals fail to attempt or complete some tasks because of the perception of impending failure. The individual perceives that no response one makes will result in resolution of the task. This helplessness perception, by the individual, is thought to be caused by response-reinforcement independence (Klein & Seligman, 1976). Such perceptions may thwart the motivation or need to achieve of the individual. Clarizo and McCoy (1976) note that "one would expect that those with high

achievement motivation would feel highly responsible for their successes and failures whereas those with low achievement motivation (or fear of failure) would be more defensive and attribute outcomes to sources outside themselves" (p.71).

Many studies have reported that an individual's perceptions are determined by one's attribution of the causes of the event. Therefore, new procedures have been attempted whereby a new attribution is taught to the individual. Nisbett and Schacter (1966) and Valins and Nisbett (1971) have introduced procedures referred to as "attribution therapy." Clinicians such as Davison (1966) and Meichenbaum (1977) have used therapeutic techniques referred to as "cognitive restructuring" or by modifying what the individual says to oneself about response-reinforcement events, with favorable results. Dweck (1975) developed a technique to teach grade school children to alter the perception of the relationship between responses and subsequent reinforcement. The technique referred to as "attribution retraining" attempts to teach the child to establish a perceived dependent relationship between response and failure. The dependent relationship should then serve as a cue for the individual to act, when confronted with impending failure. In attempting to explain the effect to change upon the individual, the components of ability and effort have to be explored. Weiner and Kukla (1970) report that the "intuitively reasonable dichotomy between ability (can) and motivation (try) has proven useful in the analysis of many aspects of behavior. Success at an achievement goal may be attributed to unusual effort and/or special ability,

while failure might indicate a lack of motivation and/or ability" (p. 2). Ability seems to be a stable property of the individual and is subject to little change. In contrast, effort is viewed as a variant property of the individual. Consequently, effort is subject to influence by cognitive and instrumental tasks.

Dweck (1975) utilized the "attribution retraining" technique to alter the effort attribution of the grade school children, thus helping to alleviate learned helplessness in these children. This procedure was effective in enhancing the persistence of children's performance on arithmetic tasks. The attribution retraining procedure involved both success and failure experiences in an irregular pattern. Since this procedure involved a reinforcement schedule accompanied by the attribution retraining procedure, the increased persistence may be due in part to the schedule of reinforcement as well as attribution retraining. Further empirical support is sought for the cause of such change in performance with learned helpless individuals, whether it is due to the attribution retraining procedure, the schedule of reinforcement, or other unidentified factors.

Learned helpless students tend to experience a decrement in performance when confronted with a demanding task. Learning disabled children exhibit similar characteristics in that they fail to attempt some tasks even though they appear capable of performing some of those tasks correctly. Functionally, it would seem that many learning disabled children experience

the phenomenon identified by Seligman as learned helplessness.

Brock and Kowitz (1980) sought to identify learned helpless learning disabled children. They investigated the effects of altering attribution for failure so that learned helpless students would learn to respond to tasks more effectively. Procedures involving reinforcement and attribution retraining were assessed in terms of their effectiveness in developing persistence on difficult tasks, internalization of personal responsibility, and improved academic achievement in mathematics.

Twenty-eight elementary learning disabled children viewed as learned helpless were randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions, by virtue of their score on the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale. The students were administered pre-assessment and post-assessment trials of the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale, Peabody Individual Achievement Test - Mathematics subtest, and the length of time expended on unsolvable block design tasks (first and last days of training). It was hypothesized that a procedure that taught the learned helpless learning disabled children to take responsibility for their behavior would cause them to invest more effort on tasks, thus leading to a change in performance. This should lead to increased persistence, or increased motivation toward a task. Subsequently, increased persistence should help to establish a dependent relationship between one's performance and reinforcement. Such a bond should lead to an increase in internalization of responsibility (internal locus of control).

The results indicated that learned helpless learning disabled children who received attribution retraining became more persistent on unsolvable tasks than did those students who received no attribution retraining. Furthermore, significant effects were observed for time on task, internalization of personal responsibility and performance on the mathematics subtests, over trials. The results indicated that learned helpless learning disabled children can be taught to become more persistent on tasks.

Reference Note

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